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THE
CIRCULAR LETTER
OF THE
England. — Churches, etc. — Baptists.
EASTERN ASSOCIATION,

HELD AT
HEMEL HEMPSTEAD, HERTS.

MAY 14th and 15th, MDCCLXXVI.



To the Protestant Dissenting Churches
usually denominated BAPTISTS, as-
sembling for Divine Worship

At Cambridge ;	Hertford ;
Cheneys, Bucks ;	Hempstead, Herts ;
Chesham, Bucks ;	Hitchin, Herts ;
Colnbrook, Bucks ;	New-Mill, Herts ;
Harlow, Essex ;	Woodrow, Bucks :

This CIRCULAR LETTER is with
great Respect addressed

By Robert Robinson,	William Nash ;
Hugh Giles ;	
James Sleap ;	
William Walker ;	
Isaac Gould ;	
Robert Baskerville ;	
Morgan Jones,	{ Nat. Saunders,
John Geard,	{ W. Bedford ;
Henry Blaine ;	William Thomas ;
Richard Morris,	George Long :

Ministers, and Messengers,
Representing the said Churches in
Association.

To the Protestant Episcopal Churches
affiliated denominationally, as
preparing for Divine Worship

At Cambridge:	Henry Jones
Charles Jones	Henry Jones
Charles Jones	Henry Jones
Charles Jones	Henry Jones
Charles Jones	Henry Jones
Charles Jones	Henry Jones

This Circular Letter is with
great respect addressed.

By Robert Johnson	Wm. Jones
John Jones	Wm. Jones
John Jones	Wm. Jones
John Jones	Wm. Jones
John Jones	Wm. Jones
John Jones	Wm. Jones
John Jones	Wm. Jones
John Jones	Wm. Jones
John Jones	Wm. Jones
John Jones	Wm. Jones

It is signed by the said Churches in
the year 1840.

HONOURED BRETHREN,

WE cheerfully embrace this opportunity of publicly addressing you, and of expressing in this manner our approbation of the grand principle of all trust in your societies, the *responsibility* of officers to those, who appoint them. In obedience to your own free nomination we have attended this association, and, agreeably to your directions, we send you this account of it.

It appears, by the several letters sent from the churches in this connection, and by the accounts given by the ministers and messengers present at this association, that the churches, on the whole, are in a prosperous state. All the congregations are supplied with ministers; the ministers are zealously employed in the duties of their office; the people respect and attend the public ordinances; and, although there are some just causes of humiliation and complaint, yet there are far more causes of gratitude and praise.

In order to preserve your present prosperity, and to promote your future edification, permit us to remind you of the importance of the principles, the practices, and even the peculiarities of your churches, and to recommend each to your particular attention.

RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLE is of the utmost importance to our churches, the very being of them depends on it; for, as they are not supported by the state for any temporal purposes, they cannot long subsist without it; or, if they do subsist a while, they are unanimated carcases, they have *a name that they live, and are dead.*

God is an infinite spirit, an object of contemplation: but not of vision. The invisible excellence of God is displayed in all the works of nature, and in all the ways of providence; and just and proper

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notions

notions of his perfections, including the *virtues*, that are necessarily connected with the relation of those perfections to us, form that system of natural religion, which S. Paul calls *the truth of God*, and which, for its utility as far as it goes, should be inculcated among christians.

Christianity elucidates and confirms the truths of natural religion, and it also reveals other facts, which the highest human penetration could never have discovered. Of this kind are the introduction, the extent, and the penalty of moral evil; the plan of redemption; the person of the redeemer; and the present and future state and felicity of the redeemed. Christianity collects the divine glories into a point in the person and offices of Christ, displaying a brightness so striking as to fix and affect every beholder, and at the same time cooling and softening the object so as to render it at once the most magnificent and the most condescending, the most formidable and the most amiable object in all the compass of contemplative thought. Here God appears supremely terrible to sin, and supremely good to the sinner. In punishing our substitute he sits the inflexible judge surrounded with all the terrible pomp of omnipotence; and in pardoning the principals, he displays a love beyond the softest compassion of the tenderest parent.

The knowledge and belief of these articles produce in the heart a disposition to universal holiness, which expresseth itself in a pious conformity to natural obligations, and to the positive institutes of religion; in a benevolent discharge of every social duty to our fellow-creatures; and in a regular veneration for ourselves. The good man views his high and *holy calling*, and rises superior to the slavery of sin.

Every idea, that operates in this manner, is a *religious principle*, and miserable is the state of those, who are destitute of it. An unprincipled
mind

mind is an easy prey to every vice. Some individuals, void of the knowledge of *the miserable moral state of man*, are full of pride and presumption: others destitute of faith in *the atonement* are involved in distress and despair; while others are rioting in the excesses of this life, and violating every divine command to gratify their senses and their passions, through their fatal ignorance of *a blessed immortality*. If whole societies retain the ceremonies of religion, after they have lost their faith and knowledge, they resemble a dead carcase placed in a living attitude, and wrapped in a gaudy shroud.

If, therefore, brethren, you value your own happiness, or that of your children, and families, and friends, and, above all, that of the church, to which you belong, you must inculcate *religious principle*, you must point to the *teacher sent from God*, and say to those around you, *This is God's beloved son, hear him*.

This leads us to the second article, the importance of performing THE PRACTICES of your churches. Beside the general practice of every moral virtue, and of every christian grace, you will, we dare say, pay a particular attention to those practices, which seminate the principles of religion in a congregation.

Make conscience of a regular attendance on public worship, as often as the church meets for this purpose. Attend diligently with your families, to the word preached by your pastors, it is *the power of God to salvation*. Be present in your places before the worship begins, avoid dissipation and indolence while it continues, stay till the whole is finished, and then meditate on it in retirement, turn it into prayer, or converse with one another on what you have heard. The last part of divine service is a fine expressive significant part of it. The minister, who is *the ambassador of Christ*, spreads holy hands over you, and prays on your part that *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship*

ship of the Holy Ghost MAY BE, and *declares* on God's part that his parental regard is *with you all*, to which you cannot but say, Amen. Public worship among you receives no solemnity from architecture, instrumental music, history paintings, and peculiar vestments: but its simplicity gives it a far superior solemnity, when it is performed with *reverence and godly fear*. John Baptist was a plain homely man: but *Herod feared him, knowing that he was a just man, and an holy*.

Keep up family religion, the reading of the holy scriptures, singing, and prayer, or the last at least. A little forecast will gain you time for this twice a day, and study to make it short and agreeable, that it may not disgust, but edify your families.

Catechise your children and servants; either by requiring them to repeat by heart four or five questions and answers in printed catechisms to you once a week, and by familiarly explaining them to them; or by requiring them to repeat to you by heart one verse of scripture every day, from which you may derive several familiar questions, and lead them by this mean into a habit of thinking, reflecting, and reasoning on the great truths of religion. How happy will you be to see *the good seed bring forth in one child thirty, in another sixty, in another a hundred fold!* How happy in your dying agonies to be able to say to a pious son, *I go the way of all the earth: but thou art a wise man, and knowest what thou oughtest to do!* You should pay the greater attention to this branch of family religion, in order to wipe off that foul scandal, which some zealots have cast on us for not sprinkling our infants, as if we were careless about their salvation, because we omitted a superstitious custom.

Maintain private social meetings, for singing, prayer, and christian conference. Habituate yourselves to *weep with them, that weep, to rejoice with them, that rejoice, to bear one another's burdens, and so to fulfil the law of Christ.* Endeavour.

Endeavour to promote one another's temporal interest. Deal with one another ; employ one another ; intermarry together ; give one another advice and assistance ; consider your whole species as your brethren ; but regard your own community as your family.

Finally, *Be patient, prudent, and tender to one another's infirmities.* Conceal them from the world ; let the too common practice of whispering them among yourselves sink into disuse ; pity and pray for the weak, *exhort them by the meekness and gentleness of Christ*, to take heed to their ways : but by no means exasperate them. Time and patience have done wonders in recovering backsliders, while contrary dispositions, productive of violent measures, have been attended with scandalous effects. Pay a particular attention in the choice of your officers to men of a soft healing spirit, they are unspeakable blessings to a christian church, and of them learn to exercise that *meekness of wisdom*, which an apostle recommends.

Lastly, Brethren, allow us to recommend to you an attention to THE PECULIARITIES of your churches. You hold some truths, which moral philosophers teach ; some, that the Greek church, and the church of Rome hold ; some, which other protestant churches maintain ; and others that are peculiar to yourselves. Do not neglect to inculcate those truths, which others hold ; if *many teachers do virtuously*, labour ye to *excel them all*. But particularly enforce the truths, that are peculiar to your own societies, and for the sake of which you have separated from your brethren. Support the right of private judgment, and liberty of conscience in opposition to all human authority in matters of religion ; the acknowledgment of Christ alone as the head of the church ; and the sufficiency of the holy scriptures as the rule of faith and practice. These general truths include the frame and constitution of your churches ; the nature and
number

number of your offices ; the mode of divine worship ; the rites, ceremonies, or positive institutes of religion ; the terms of admission to the ministry and to church-membership ; the free choice of your ministers ; and the nature of your discipline. With the knowledge of these truths providence hath entrusted you ; may it be your holy ambition to say, when you give up your accounts, *Lord ! thou deliveredst unto us five talents : behold we have gained besides them five talents more !*

The principles, that distinguish our churches, are but very little known to the bulk of our countrymen ; some condemn them without examination ; others view them through false mediums ; and, what is worse than all, many, who act upon them, do but half understand them, and cannot at all defend them. The Lord make you *spiritual men, judging all things !* and able to *give a reason for the hope, that is in you !*

There is nothing in our principles destructive of the peace of civil society ; nothing hostile to government ; we have no dissertation in scripture on the best form of government, whether it be monarchical or republican ; we hold nothing injurious to any religious association ; we distinguish between *the constitution* of a church and *the members*, who compose it, and we venerate the last for acting up to their best knowledge, while we reprobate the first as unscriptural in its frame, unsociable and violent in its temper, and unfriendly to the growth of religious knowledge, primitive morality, a chaste faith, and an universal love. If others, after all we have said, will not make these distinctions, we have only to say, *He, that is unjust, let him be unjust still.* Be you diligent, brethren ! to impart clear notions of these articles to your children, and not only labour to make them christians : but strive also to form them wise, conscientious, and peaceable protestant dissenters, ornaments to our churches, and comforts to yourselves. Be

Be not unmindful, brethren, of the support of your societies. Your pastors ask no emoluments, your churches have none to bestow. Conscience makes us your ministers, and it is to your credit, as well as to our comfort, to enable us to *provide things honest in the sight of all men*. Your voluntary tithes are our support, and your free contributions the support of your places of worship, and the relief of your poor. To enable you to discharge these duties, you must avoid the fashionable vices, and the expensive luxuries of the times; you must strive to excel in your several professions; you must be industrious in getting, and frugal in using the blessings of providence; you must commend yourselves to your fellow citizens by ingenuity, integrity, punctuality, humanity, affability, sympathy, hospitality; in a word, by uniting in your own persons the decency of the man with the dignity of the christian.

Virtue will not fail of its reward in your churches. You may perhaps gain nothing of this world by the practice of it: but you will acquire that affection and esteem of your brethren, and that reputation in the house of God, which you will value beyond all riches; and you may ever contemplate that most transporting of all periods, in which the arbiter of all will say to you in the hearing of all, and with the consent of all, *Well done good and faithful servants, enter ye into the joy of your Lord*.

And now, brethren! we commend you to God, and to the word of his grace. We bear you on our hearts before the Lord, and you will, we doubt not, *pray for us*. *The Lord make every one, who comes into your societies, like Rachel and like Leah; may each build the house of Israel, do worthily in his country, and be famous in his church! May each church be an habitation of God through the Spirit; like the house of Obed-edom, may it be blessed for the ark's-sake!*

Signed by order of the Assembly, } Robert Robinson.
by the Moderator,

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Signed by order of the Assembly, } Robert Robinson.
by the Moderator,

B R E V I A T E S:

Hemel Hempstead, Herts. May 14, 1776.

TUESDAY evening, 6 o'clock. Ministers, messengers, and members of the churches in this association, and members of other churches, met at the meeting-house. The Rev. Mr. Blaine began in prayer. The Rev. Mr. Robinson was chosen Moderator. Mr. Nash was chosen Secretary. The secretary read the letters from the churches. Memoranda were taken. A petition from the church at Hertford for recommendation to collect for a meeting-house was read, approved by the assembly, and by their order signed by the Moderator. The general state of the churches was discussed. The Moderator was desired to draw up the circular letter. The Moderator concluded in prayer, at 9 o'clock.

Wednesday morning, 6 o'clock. The same assembly met again. The Rev. Mr. Jones prayed. Several resolutions passed relative to the better government of this association, which are to be transmitted to the churches. Several questions discussed relative to the best mode of catechizing children; the seminating of religious principles; the discharging of the several offices of the churches, &c. &c. The Moderator read his plan of the circular letter, which being approved, he closed the assembly by prayer at 9 o'clock.

Half past 10 o'clock. The public meeting was opened by the Moderator; by singing the 1st, 2d, and 8th verses of the lxxxth psalm.

The Rev. Mr. Sleap prayed.

The Moderator sang the two first verses of the cxxxiv hymn, first book.

The Rev. Mr. Gould prayed, and preached from 1 Sam. iv. 13. *Lo! Eli sat upon a seat by the way side, watching; for his heart trembled for the ark of God.*

The Moderator sang five verses of the cxxxii psalm.

The Rev. Mr. Geard prayed:

The Moderator sang the 3d and 4th verses of the xcvi psalm.

The Rev. Mr. Walker preached from 1 Thess. v. 17. *Pray without ceasing.*

The Moderator concluded in prayer, and dismissed the assembly.

At 6 in the evening. The Moderator preached from 1 Tim. i. 15. *Worthy of all acceptance.*

The Rev. Mr. Baskerville prayed.

The Moderator dismissed the assembly with the usual benediction, and gave notice that the next association would be held at Cambridge, on the Tuesday and Wednesday in the week before Whitsuntide, 1777. The Rev. Messrs. Morris, and Jones, are appointed to preach. The services to begin at 5 o'clock on Tuesday evening; at 6 on Wednesday morning; at half past 10 in the forenoon; and at 6 in the evening.



